Questioning Eugenics and the dignity of the Human Person in the age of Technology

Ibekwe Ephraim Udochukwu
Seat of Wisdom Seminary Affiliate of Pontifical Urban University Rome
& Imo State University Owerri, Nigeria.
udo.chukss@yahoo.com

Abstract

The field of biomedical science has offered modern man more options to choose from, than ever about what their future children will be or look like. Today, embryo selection techniques, for instance, have availed most people the power to choose the sex of their child, to avoid the birth of a child with a disability, or even to choose deliberately to create a disabled child. With new biotechnological tools emerging daily, many people deem parents personally and socially responsible for the results of their choosing to bear children, i.e. all tests should be done, and parents are responsible for only "keeping" healthy children. Some fear parents may soon be left to their own devices if they have children who require extra time and social spending. Such possibilities raise important ethical issues –about which of these choices, are morally permissible or morally wrong along with closely related questions about the extent to which the law should restrict these areas of medicine. The development of methods of availing people with the finest possible progeny is a true cause for concern today. The preoccupation of this article is to understand the extent to which the questions that Eugenics posits on the human person can be answered with keen clarity. It argues on the ethical concerns on eugenics as an approach in biomedical science that is evolving with pace. With an analytical method, this article while not deriding the impact of biotechnology and the medical sciences, argues for Human dignity in its strictest consideration.

Keywords: Dignity, Eugenics, Human Person, Technology and Biomedical Science.

1. Introduction

Francis Galton as a renowned natural scientist made lots of contributions to what we have today in Eugenics not only as a geneticist, and eugenicist, Galton's exposition in mathematics and meteorology gave him numerous insights into coining "eugenics" hence considered by mainstream scholars to be the father of the eugenics movement. He believed so much in nature and nurture, thus human beings in their natural environment possess all inherent characteristics necessary for nurturing them in society. The publication of *The Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin

was a great motivation in formulating the eugenics principles and theories. Darwin had described in the *Origin of Species* the theory of evolution and natural selection, hence bringing into discussion the idea of evolutionary progress. Dalton was determined to adopt the principles inherent in this publication them for the improvement of the human race. He was not actually the first person to address controlled breeding in humans in order to create a 'better' species – the idea dates back at least two thousand years ago, in the ancient Greco-Roman World. In the Roman Republic a Roman father was legitimately obliged to immediately kill his child if they were "dreadfully deformed", this is because the foreseen deformation may inhibit the Child especially the male folk from carrying out his functions as a citizen, especially, in the struggle to defend the Roman empire during War or in in trivial matters when it is established that the child is stained by abominable vices. Killings are usually by drowning in swamps. For Galton social and mental traits, like talent, work ethic, personality, and intelligence, were inherited (Galton, 1865; Galton, 1869) and are transferable from parents to off-springs. Thus, good traits must be preserved and enhanced while unwanted ones should be discarded. This motivated his *Hereditary Genius*, a compilation he released in 1869, here he articulated and showed that success seemed to run in families and that the more closely related a person was to a high-achiever, the more likely they were to become one themselves (Galton, 1869; Mackenzie, 1976), this is vice versa, i.e the more closely related a person was to a failure, the more likely they were to become one themselves. Hence as already established, intelligence, accomplishment, and various other traits were inherited. He thought that a person's environment had very little to do with the development of such characteristics but innate. Coining eugenics in 1883, He described it as "a brief word to express the science of improving stock, which is by no means confined to questions of judicious mating, but which, especially in the case of man, takes cognizance of all influences that tend in however remote a degree to give to the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable than they otherwise would have had" (Galton, 1883).

Galton believed strongly that eugenics should become a movement. This is because if we have the right traits of the human race, society will become a better place for inhabitation. (Galton, 1869; Kevles, 1985) and that species improvement could be achieved through the elite marrying and having large numbers of children. However, in Galton's later work, he also focused on the 'least desirable' - explaining who these undesirables were, creating classification systems for them, and suggesting how they should be treated (Mackenzie, 1976). Galton did not seem to promote cruelty or extreme measures in the name of eugenics, but he did propose that the so-called unfit be segregated. This is one of the greatest criticism of his positions on Eugenics. This position puts a question mark on the ethical nature of Eugenic. It becomes a mark for inequality. Overall, Galton encouraged the exploration of the inherited differences between classes of

people and promoted the belief that certain groups were fundamentally and genetically superior to others. While he also discovered important concepts in statistics and psychology, many of these were simply mechanisms to further his eugenic ideas (Gillham, 2001; Kevles, 1985). He believed that the key to a Utopian society was a eugenic religion, and Galton dedicated his life to eugenics.

1.1 What is Eugenics?

As already seen in the introductory note, Eugenics is a term derived from the Greek words '*eu*'- good, well and '*gen'*- genesis, creation, proposed by Francis Galton, who defined it as the science of improving the inherited stock, not only by judicious mating but by all other influences. His motivation for conceiving a mode for improving inherited stock is enshrined in his assertion that; "Man is gifted with pity and other kindly feelings; he has also the power of preventing many kinds of suffering. I conceive it to fall well within his province to replace Natural Selection by other processes that are more merciful and not less effective. This is precisely the aim of Eugenics."(Galton, 1908). Eugenics from the Greek *"eugenes",* "good birth", underlies ideas quite ancient in origin. Plato argued that human baby production should be limited to people selected for desirable qualities.

In fact, the works and postulations of Plato, Aristotle, Gregor Mendel, Robert Malthus, Friedrich Nietzsche and Charles Darwin among others, have often been fingered as containing seminal strands/ideas which became fundamental to the framing of the term in its modern understanding. The term however, was coined in 1883 by Francis Galton, an Englishman and cousin of Charles Darwin, who applied Darwinian science to heredity and "good birth". Eugenics entails that certain genetically "selected" traits all due to "defective germ plasma, should not be allowed to reproduce. Francis Galton argued that genius and talents are inherited. He advocated "positive eugenics" for improving future generations by encouraging the "best" in society to have more children. However, "negative eugenics" involves culling (a form of thinning of the human race as is done in agriculture) defectives and degenerates from the population to promote and preserve the fittest. Eugenics, as understood by Galton, was the science for improving human stock by ridding it of undesirable traits and increasing the desirable ones. Today, Eugenics can be defined as the application of the principles of genetics and inheritance to the improvement of the human race, in order to secure, by analogy with the selected breedings applied from immemorial time to plants and domestic animals, a desirable combination of physical characteristics and mental traits in the offspring of suitable mated parents *(*Galton, 2002). In modern times, eugenics is understood in terms of being positive eugenics or negative eugenics.

1.1.1 Positive eugenics

This entails the manipulation of human heredity or breeding, or both, to produce superior or improved people, much in keeping with the definition

“good in birth”. It is aimed basically at encouraging reproduction among the genetically advantaged persons; this is seen in the reproduction of the intelligent, the healthy, and the successful. Possible approaches include financial and political stimuli, targeted demographic analyses, *in vitro* fertilization, egg transplants, and cloning (John, 2008).

1.1.2 Negative eugenics

However, known as population eugenics, means to improve the quality of the human race by eliminating or excluding biologically inferior people from the population through sterilization or segregation, those deemed physically, mentally, or morally "undesirable". This includes abortions, sterilization, and other methods of family planning (Krebs, 2011) or racism as seen in the Hitler’s Concentration Camp.

1.2 Dalton’s Eugenics as Logical Extent of Darwin’s Natural Selection

Galton coined the term “eugenics” as the logical extent of natural selection, a theory first proposed by his cousin Charles Darwin at the conclusion of the *Descent of Man*. Observing the mating habits of animals, Darwin drew the parallel between selectively pairing certain breeds of animals in order to improve one's stock and the choice that lay before humanity: breed well, or breed ill. The idea was quite simple and Darwin noted that the most attractively coloured, or strongest males were chosen by the females to mate with. It was no different with humans- attractive women were sought as mates for men, and in return the fittest women chose the fittest men to marry and have children with, thus perpetuating their genetic lineage. The eugenic views of Darwin and Galton were received with mixed reviews in America. On one hand, concepts of population control, mandatory sterilization, and other state-instituted forms of eugenics were appalling. But on the other side were the leaders who saw eugenics as a way of transmitting healthy, strong, and super future to their children.

2. Conceptualizing the eugenics agenda in history

The extent of the eugenics agenda was epitomized in the forced sterilization of women who were institutionalized. Sterilization laws began to force eugenic codes in nations all around the world. The United States sterilization practices had been furthered by Harry Laughlin, publisher of the Model Sterilization Law of 1922. Most of these sterilizations happened for economic reasons. Many state laws permitted this and a landmark Supreme Court case, Buck v. Bell in 1927, ratified those laws. The Buck v. Bell Supreme Court Case is one case in U.S history that captures the

chilling mindset of eugenics. Carrie Buck was a 17- year old white female living in Virginia who had been raped and impregnated. She was committed to the State Colony for Epileptics and Feebleminded and became Virginia's first person to be sterilized under the new eugenics code. After many appeals, her case reached the Supreme Court. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes summed up the Court's decision/ruling with these strong words: We have seen more than once that the public welfare may call upon the best citizens for their lives. It would be strange if it could not call upon those who already sap the strength of the State for these lesser sacrifices, often not felt to be such by those concerned, in order to prevent our being swarmed with incompetence. It is better for the entire world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind. In his Eugenics: Morality and Ethics, Michael S, posits that the principle that sustains compulsory vaccination is broad enough to cover cutting the Fallopian tubes, three generations of imbeciles are enough.

Even though, in May 2002, Governor Mark Warner of Virginia issued a formal apology for the State's decision to sterilize nearly 7,500 people between 1924 and 1979, the eugenic attitude masked in these colourful lines, x-ray the fact that humans are viewed not in terms of their intrinsic value but in terms of their utilitarian value. It is frightening how dark the human heart can grow, and maybe it is appropriate we consider how demented we can become in our thinking. Worth considering also is the true purpose of the advancement of civilization.

3. Eugenics Today

Eugenic sentiments are all around us today. Sometimes we consider that "stupid people should not breed"; that some couples "are exactly the type of people who should be having kids" perhaps because they are smart, loving, and kind"; we even see someone who has a kid and remark, "that is the last person in the world who should be having a child". While most people would admit that certain types of people are more qualified to have kids than others, the steps taken to ensure this have always been viewed with some sort of distrust by morally conscious persons. Bioethics has provided a method of prenatal sex discernment even before implantation, elsewhere; techniques for specific gene testing for monogenic disorders have been devised. Granted, these procedures can be very useful for diagnosing genetic diseases whose presentation is linked to the sex of a child (Stepan, 1991). It could also offer the possibility to prepare for any sex-dependent aspects of parenting. Nevertheless, these could lead to Sex-selective infanticide, Sex-selective child abandonment, Sex-selective adoption, and sex- selective abortion. It is regarding the abuses of these procedures that arguments have ensued in the fields of morality and theology.

3.1 The Eugenics Arguments

Eugenics, as a social philosophy, advocates improvement of human hereditary traits through social intervention. Eugenicists seek to create "more perfect" individuals and/or to alleviate human suffering through advocacy of policies that are perceived to lead to an improvement in the gene pool. Means to achieve these goals would include IVF-PGD (In vitro fertilization, pre-implantation genetic diagnosis). To determine the acceptability of any practice of eugenics requires that we distinguish ethically justifiable genetic "improvements" from those for which we would consider intervention to be morally repugnant.

In her article titled *Eugenics* published in the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Sara Goering provides an exposition of the arguments for and against liberalizing the practices of eugenics. For her, arguments in favour of eugenics have been advanced along the following lines. First, advocates argue that eugenics is individual in nature rather than state-sponsored. The intended benefit of any eugenic intervention is private (for the child-to-be, or the family). Second, they argue for individual liberty which implies the freedom of parents to choose according to their own values and conception of the good life. Third, it presumes value pluralism, recognizing that individual parents will often desire different things for their offspring (Largent, 2008). Many theorists argue in favour of permitting parents to make choices about their children's genetics. They emphasize the obligation of parents to treat the diseases of their children and the option to enhance and improve the genetic makeup of their children in view of the potential benefits that accrue there-from.

Critics of the eugenic trends equally advance various arguments.

The *Expressivist* argument contends that the entire enhancement project sends a negative message that "it is better not to exist than to exist with a disability". For proponents of this argument, to advocate for eugenics is coterminous with telling the disabled persons; "we do not need more like you". For them, this type of attitude is a form of discrimination. Another variety of critics highlight the troubling aggregate effect of individual choices, particularly when they are all ill-informed or relatively biased. Still, others highlight the ways in which the motivations for the enhancement project express hubris, a drive to mastery and control, that left unchecked, threatens to alter the nature and meaning of parent-child relationships, from openness to unconditional love to design and manufacture. Modern man seeks to subdue and control everything in his immediate environment and beyond and thus, fail to appreciate the gifted character of human powers and achievements. Another major issue is that, the parents are more concerned about what they want without taking into cognizance and

no way of knowing the peculiar desires that the children might have. For instance, if the parents desire to enhance their child with the genetic composition of a footballer in the class of Messi and Ronaldo, and a gene for mastery in music in the category of Davido, Handel, Beyonce or Wizkid, what happens if the child desires to be a great theologian like Joseph Ratzinger or a popular actress like Ini Edo? Again, while the parents are busy with enhancing the child with prodigious and exotic genes, they may forget to add the most basic qualities like humility, reasonable responsibility and solidarity. The child could possibly still be born incomplete and ill equipped to battle with the facticities and vicissitudes of life.

4. Re-evaluating the Ethical Concerns of Eugenics

Genetics holds promise not only for diagnosis but also for the treatment of diseases. Techniques of so-called gene therapy could not only be applied to diseases, but also be used for improving capacities such as intelligence, longevity, memory, etc. This possibility for genetic enhancement gives rise to a moral dilemma. On the one hand, it seems natural for parents to give their children the best possible opportunities, and what could be better than the traits mentioned? On the other hand, the determination of crucial properties would give parents a power over the lives of other human beings that contradicts the basic principle of human freedom. This principle has been advanced by Jürgen Habermas in relation to both genetic enhancement and reproductive cloning. The successful application of these techniques would cause the birth of children, the genetic makeup of whom was intentionally designed by other human beings. According to Habermas, both individual human freedom and a relationship of equality would be violated and the moral self-understanding of the human species would be deeply altered.

When a couple can orchestrate the gender of their child, what is next? Will we allow medical tests to screen fertilized eggs based on the couple's desires, such as hair and eye colour? When do we cease to become partners of God and attempt to replace God? Eugenics creates a world where "perfection" can be bought and the child is seen as a mere commodity. It entails choosing among embryos for those traits they believe will give their children their best chances in life. Sometimes as a result of the epic loss of the deterministic aspect of bringing a child into the world, the attitude of the parents towards the child might be negatively affected. One might also ask, does having a child with predetermined genetic characteristics actually fit into the Divine plan? The ethical dilemmas related to eugenics such as the possible reinforcement of gender bias, the discarding of human embryos, threats to the well-being of sex- selected

children, self-determination, and the dignity of the individual remain to be evaluated (Carlson, 2001).

The conviction of Christians is that each life is intrinsically, incalculably valuable and the child is seen as a gift. Humans "procreate" (that is share in the ontological procreative act of God) and do not reproduce (as is the case with manufacturing a commodity). Desiring to give birth to healthy children is not an evil in itself. What begs the question however is the means of attaining this end. In light of this, moral theologians have advanced philosophical and theological foundations of the inviolability of human life. The sacredness of life gives rise to its inviolability. (*Evangelium Vitae,* 40, 1995). The dignity of man derives from the image of God (*Imago Dei*) imprinted on humans at creation. Of the basic qualities of Being, it has been sufficiently argued that every being is good. Human life is good in itself and this goodness has a connection with God the creator. The totality of man as *corpore et anima unus* with both spiritual and material dimensions accentuates this connection. (*Gaudium et Spes*, 14, 1965). Granted that modern biotechnological tools can help reduce human suffering and ameliorate the level of pain, no person is a creative mistake that needs correction. Man must not become more an object of certain technologies than the responsible subject of his own action.

The effort of eugenics advocates to control the procreative habits of peoples was a seditious and subversive attempt. Drawing insights from the works and postulations of Plato, Aristotle, Gregor Mendel, Robert Malthus, Friedrich Nietzsche and Charles Darwin among others, eugenicists aimed at improving the genetic composition of the human race by doing away with undesirable traits. This did not escape the notice of renowned Catholic scholars and theologians like G. K. Chesterton. This surreptitious attempt to upturn the official teaching of the Church's Magisterium on marriage and family life, brought eugenics into direct conflict with the Catholic Church. Differentiating between biologically superior and inferior individuals, eugenics advocates fought for public policy measures to discourage the reproduction of the inferior, the mentally ill, the impoverished, the feeble-minded, etc. (Jones,1995). The root difference between Catholic teaching and that of modern eugenics is that one places the final end of man in eternal life, while the other places it in civil worth. By separating the defectives from the rest of society, eugenics advocates tend to make morality subservient to bodily and mental culture. The 1930 Encyclical Letter of Pope Pius XI, *Casti conubii*, sees eugenics as another very grave crime that involves the taking of the life of the offspring hidden in the mother's womb. It equally condemns the advocacy for death-dealing operations even for medical and therapeutic indication. It states: "But no reason, however grave, may be put forward by which anything intrinsically against nature may become conformable to nature and morally good". It further affirms that the family is more sacred than the state and that men are begotten not from the earth and for time, but for heaven and eternity (Pope Pius XI, 1930).

5. Conclusion

There must be a precise and vigorous reaffirmation of the value of human life and its inviolability. Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or willful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where people are treated as mere instruments of gain rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others like them are infamies indeed. They poison human society, and they do more harm to those who practise them than to those who suffer from the injury. (Pope John Paul II, 1965). The various techniques of artificial reproduction, which claim to be at the service of life, actually open the door to new threats against life. Thus, destroying the "spare embryos" (Gaudium et Spes, 1965). which result from these procedures or using such for research under the pretext of scientific or medical progress, in fact reduces human life to the level of simple "biological material" to be freely disposed of. Leaders in their cadre must take precautions against the mentality which accepts life only under certain conditions and rejects it when it is affected by any limitation, handicap or illness. Denying nourishment to babies born with serious handicaps or illnesses barbaric is shameful and utterly reprehensible. (Agar, 2004*)* Any directive or program of the civil and health authorities or of scientific organizations which in any way were to favor a link between prenatal diagnosis and abortion, or which were to go as far as directly to induce expectant mothers to submit to prenatal diagnosis planned for the purpose of eliminating fetuses which are affected by malformations or which are carriers of hereditary illness, is to be condemned as a violation of the unborn child's right to life and as an abuse of the prior rights and duties of the spouses. Condemnable also is any attempt by doctors and biologists to establish the domination of technology over the origin and destiny of the human person as contrary to the dignity and equality that must be common to parents and children. (King,1999).

Using genetic engineering for purposes other than medical treatment calls for consideration. Because it is against human dignity, any attempt to introduce alterations with the presumed aim of improving and strengthening the gene pool since they exhibit a certain dissatisfaction or even rejection of the value of the human being as a finite creature and person. The following are the real and potential risks involved in such attempts. First, such manipulation would promote a eugenic mentality and would lead to indirect social stigma with regard to people who lack certain qualities, while privileging qualities that happen to be appreciated by a

certain culture or society (Longerich, 2010). This would threaten the fundamental truth of the equality of all human beings which is expressed in the principle of justice, the violation of which, in the long run, would harm peaceful coexistence among individuals. On another note, man in attempting to create a new type of human being, tries to take the place of his Creator. (Gaudium et Spes, 27).

Response to eugenics in all its forms and manifestations stems from the fact that despite its lofty promises and seeming benefits, the underpinning motivation for eugenics is often masked by telling phrases and specious arguments. In truth, the entire story is not often told. The risks and far reaching implications of these procedures are more often than not ignored and carefully hidden away from public eye. Thus, “at the basis of all these tendencies lies the ethical relativism where moral norms considered to be objective and binding are held to lead to authoritarianism and intolerance and man becomes the measure of all things”. (Gaudium et Spes, 70)Also, the consumerist mentality of modern society and the effort to reduce everything to mere commodity that can be bought has been the motivating factor for rooting for designer babies, genetically enhanced. The atheistic tendency of modern man to play God, the over stretching and wrong interpretation of the biblical injunction, “be fruitful, multiply, subdue the earth”, is exemplified in man’s desire to dictate what happens around his immediate environment. The misleading philosophical tenets of the 20th century existentialist philosophers who saw man as the architect of his destiny contributed in given man the false morale and gusto to attempt to rewrite the history of humanity by manufacturing in laboratories, the next generation of advanced human kind.

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